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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 002452

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: THOUSANDS PROTEST OKRUASHVILI ARREST, SAAKASHVILI
DEFENDS HIS GOVERNMENT

REF: A. TBILISI 2437

[B](#). TBILISI 2415

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (U) Summary: On September 28, several thousand people took part in a demonstration against President Saakashvili's government and the arrest of former Defense Minister Irakli Okruashvili on corruption charges (ref A). All opposition parties participated, except the New Rightists. Saakashvili returned from the UNGA on September 29 and gave a brief address expressing his disappointment with Okruashvili's "lies" (ref B) and insisting no one, including Okruashvili, was above prosecution for corruption. The President then traveled to the Upper Kodori Gorge to celebrate completion of the new road, where he gave a speech defending democracy and rule of law, and responded to Russian President Putin's comments about the protests and criticism of Georgian democracy. Saakashvili predicted that he would see Georgia's reunification with Abkhazia and South Ossetia during his Presidency by peaceful means. End Summary.

The Protest

[1](#)2. (U) On September 28, all major opposition parties, except the New Rightists, joined in a public protest against President Saakashvili's government and called for the unity against his policies. Irakli Okruashvili's "political" arrest on September 27 (ref A) was the rallying point. However, Saakashvili and his team were the target of the joint demonstration and speeches. Every opposition leader accused Saakashvili of abandoning the Rose Revolution's goal of democratic reform in favor of pursuing autocratic power. Separately, David Gamkrelidze of the New Rightists held a separate press conference in which he denounced the corruption of both Okruashvili and Saakashvili. Gamkrelidze called for constitutional regime change via elections, rather than protests. The theme of pro-opposition, rather than pro-Okruashvili, predominated during the day.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Emboffs attended the protests, which lasted more than four hours. They estimated the size of the crowd as up to 10,000 people, although media estimates ranged lower by a few thousand. The audience was very diverse, with all ages and both genders well represented. All of the speakers insisted on peaceful action, and we observed no violence or arrests firsthand. However, two confrontations between police and individuals were shown on TV. Shortly before the protests took place, Parliamentary leader and Saakashvili ally Giga Bokeria warned that any violence would not be tolerated by the government. Okruashvili provided a statement by proxy from jail, claiming he is a "political prisoner" and calling for unity to remove Saakashvili's corrupt government. Shalva Natelashvili, leader of the Labor

Party, made a grand entrance and was enthusiastically greeted by the crowd. Okruashvili's wife, Irina, and sister Maia were both present. Although approached by the press, they did not speak to the crowd. We observed approximately 400 police officers, consisting mainly of traffic and community police. Additionally, many non-uniformed men were present wearing "Criminal Police" and SOD (Special Operations Department) shirts or vests. The police primarily congregated in front of the Tbilisi School #1, blocking Rustaveli avenue. At one point it appeared they were organizing into formations, but they had largely dispersed by the time we left. Approximately 12 buses of riot police/military personnel were parked one-half mile away. We never saw any of these police on the streets or near Parliament.

¶4. (U) A spokesman for the Georgian Orthodox Church's Patriarchy, David Sharashidze, called on demonstrators to remain peaceful. However, he also objected to Okruashvili's insinuation that Saakashvili is opposed to the Orthodox Church, saying that using the Church for political means is "totally unacceptable."

¶5. (U) Both Bokeria and Tbilisi Mayor Gigi Ugulava publicly argued that Okruashvili suspected he was soon to be arrested, and therefore made his serious accusations in order to gain political cover for himself. Deputy Prosecutor Nika Gvaramia added that someone who is arrested for corruption could not be considered a political prisoner. A taped conversation between Dmitri Kitoshvili (Saakashvili's Parliamentary Secretary, who was arrested for extortion on September 24)

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and Okruashvili was aired on TV by the government as evidence of their collusion in corrupt activities. The conversation only established that the two were in communication with each

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other, and did not detail the alleged illicit sale of shares of the mobile phone company Geocell. Friday afternoon, Kitoshvili was released on bail of GEL 10,000 (USD \$6,000). (Comment: Bail itself, and especially at this low figure, is rarely given in corruption cases. End comment.)

Saakashvili Returns, Criticizes Russia from Kodori

¶6. (U) On September 29, President Saakashvili returned early from UNGA and gave televised remarks on Okruashvili's announcements and subsequent arrest. He appeared resolute but in control. He described Okruashvili's actions as personally difficult, since Okruashvili should know better than anyone his allegations of corruption were a lie. Saakashvili said Georgia enjoys freedom of press but people with a clean conscience cannot be blackmailed. He called Okruashvili's arrest a clear message that untouchable people do not exist in Georgia, but stated he had no intention of interfering in the judicial process. He added if any person fails to respect the law, regardless of any statements the person may make, the state will perform its duties.

¶7. (U) Saakashvili traveled the same day to Upper Kodori, to mark the completion of a new road connecting Samegrelo to Upper Abkhazia. He used the opportunity to respond to remarks made by Russian President Putin. From his residence in Sochi, Putin said that he hoped mass protests in Georgia would be peaceful and without bloodshed. Putin said Russia would not like to experience Georgia's "western" type of democracy. In response, Saakashvili referred specifically to the murder of Russian journalist Anna Politkovskaya and highlighted freedom of the press in Georgia. He continued, saying that unlike Russia, Georgia is rooting out and holding responsible corrupt officials, regardless of their influence. Saakashvili pointedly referred to Russian involvement in Georgian affairs in the 1990s, stating that traitors within

the country and outside have led Georgia to lose control over the separatist regions, and nobody will be able to provoke civil confrontations again because the "Georgians had already taken Russia's prescribed medicine before, and it was poison."

¶8. (U) In a surprisingly strong addendum, Saakashvili said that "during my presidency, I will complete the process of Georgia's unification and the country's territorial integrity," although by peaceful means.

The Republicans on Next Steps

¶9. (C) On October 1, Poloff met with MP David Berdzenishvili of the opposition Republican Party. Berdzenishvili commented that in one week Okruashvili has become the leader of the opposition. He said that being in jail is Okruashvili's optimal position, as it insulates him from the public's scrutiny and "unfortunate accidents." Berdzenishvili noted that the arrest and protests have indeed hurt Saakashvili's standing. Had Okruashvili not been arrested, his party would have been but one more in the political spectrum. Furthermore, he said the electorate is keen enough to note that Saakashvili has not addressed Okruashvili's charges regarding his uncle, Temur Alasania, former MP Gelashvili's beating (reputedly on the order of Merabishvili), or the death of former Prime Minister Zhvania. Berdzenishvili was aware of the recent IRI poll and the drop in Saakashvili's government's ratings. He said that the recent combination of events is further discrediting Saakashvili's government. He noted that Parliamentary Speaker Burjanadze is the only high-level member of Saakashvili's government who has not publicly addressed Okruashvili's arrest.

¶10. (C) Berdzenishvili again pointed out his and the other opposition parties', concerns about the government. In addition to the party-list threshold of 7 percent, the entirety of the Central Election Commission being affiliated with the ruling National Movement (UNM), and the proposed majoritarian "winner-take-all" system for next year's elections, he said the country's courts are in "catastrophic condition." He claims that if a true combination of internal and external pressures combine, then the country "could have real elections." Berdzenishvili said that his party would prefer to see Parliamentary elections in May 2008 -- rather than in the fall along with the Presidential election. This would restore the current Parliament's original term of four years (Saakashvili extended it to five, in order to combine it with the Presidential election.)

¶11. (C) Berdzenishvili summed up, saying that "the U.S.

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should not be perceived as a supporter of Saakashvili, but as a supporter of the country, and the Georgian people." When asked if the Republicans are working with the other opposition parties, Berdzenishvili stated that they are communicating, but have not yet formed a joint bloc. They will wait to see if the election code is either changed for the better, or if the previous election code is reinstated. He advised that the Labor Party will support the group on the Okruashvili issue, but they will run independently in the election.

Comment

¶12. (C) There have been no other protests since the large one on September 28 at Parliament. The opposition parties are discussing the idea, and are considering additional rallies in November. Some would prefer to act sooner.

TEFFT